

A HARVEST

by William Pym

SHADY LEMONADE, a singularly educational 1967 episode of the television show *Gumby*, found the hero and friends sweltering on a summer day. “It’s almost a hundred in the shade”, notes Prickle. The combination of unfiltered, close Klieg lights and goeey clay brought a frighteningly literal metalevel of urgency to the scene. A sign across the street reads, ‘lemonade, all you can drink for ten cents’. *Gumby* has forty cents, just enough for total refreshment and salvation for all of them. “Boy, I could drink a gallon,” boasts Pokey as they await their first round of drinks. No one notices the waiter’s beady eyes and bully’s rasp. They drain their glasses and order another batch. “Yes sir,” says the waiter, his true colors unfurling, “that’ll be forty cents more.” “But your sign says all you can drink for ten cents,” says *Gumby*, pluck barely hiding bafflement. “Well that’s all you can drink for ten cents.”



DOLL - PORCELAIN 2006

They're turfed out into the painful sunshine to cook up a subplot wherein a serendipitous encounter with an eccentric millionaire sees the gang open their own business, next door to the soda jerk, where all-you-can-drink lemonade costs a nickel. A happy ending. The lesson of this four-minute adventure is markedly more complicated than Gumby's typical journeys in basic altruism, responsibility, good nature and adventure. The child viewer is taught, for perhaps the first time, about the manipulative potential of semantics as it's practiced everywhere. Creative interpretation and deceptive weighting is, as Shady Lemonade terrifyingly implies, widespread enough to touch a child's breezy world, to touch one of the few activities they allowed to engage in and care about, like buying a glass of lemonade with a dime.

As the child learns that rules and words can be twisted around to mean their opposite, she learns both more about the world and of reasons to trust the world less. The child must hope for a worldview where sense and nonsense are balanced, where a combined use of rules and an acceptance of chaos encourage a working mind and a lubricated life. It is a challenge that does not go away. The practice of Anissa Mack, both her work in general and the Durham Fair project in particular, displays an eagerness to invent the most sensitive rules and appreciate the world's absurdity as finely as possible. Humor, history and education will arise as we figure out, then define, the important contemporary territory of Mack's work.

NEXT YEAR'S RHUBARB

Beyond the fact that she grew up on Long Island, one of those curious American peninsulas, Hollywood starlet Lindsay Lohan is not inherently any more interesting than this or that young cultural face. The way that her career will evolve over the next ten years, however, is gloriously definitive of a problem that has ripened through the 50-year history of accelerated pop culture. As public hunger for intimacy with celebrities has grown, from La Dolce Vita's manic paparazzi swarms through the speculative supermarket tabloid and the widening, babbling streams of blog feeds, the idea of celebrity status as an end in itself has become remarkably refined. One's life's work need only be one's careful management of self; a periodic personality retuning that ensures a nice, prominent sort of bob atop the barrel of visibility. Epidemic, insatiable interest in the lives of others has made this idea of hollow prominence a viable career path sought by millions.

Lohan has been an aggressive protagonist in this game since her mid-teens, and as her swerving, self-contradictory choices through her twenties increasingly render her a cipher, a cloud of potential in the eyes of others rather than flesh and bone, I cannot help but cast my thoughts forward. Lohan crossed a threshold of celebrity through widespread speculation about her dangerous drug use. She flatly denied. A crashing meltdown sent her into rehabilitation. She poked out the other side, reborn. Now, during her supposed recovery, comes renewed speculation about dangerous drug use. She flatly denies. A cycle, a tide, is establishing itself.

Lay understanding of the nervous system tells us that, at some point, Lohan will have to clean up her act and change her tack. And here is where it gets interesting. Once truly reformed, dried out for good after her brain and body can be battered no more, the deceptive opacity that fueled her younger life will turn into unbridled transparency to buoy her present and future. Lurid invented tales of the way she was will win her new headlines and provide a fresh platter on which she may lay herself out as feast for the fattening masses. Same meat, new cut.

Yet at no point along the line will she have had to tell the truth, for the story never had any core. Tomorrow's florid concessions of wayward depravity need be no more honest than yesterday's unblinking denials, because no one ever really knew what was going on. Thus last year's ambiguity can be tendered into next year's rhubarb, exaggerated and warped to the stardom-seeker's abiding advantage. She remains in charge because she has never been accountable to anything that really happened.

We're not talking about the soul and selling it. Good people live without much soul; it's a lot to expect of everybody you meet. We're talking, rather, of a fundamental interest in engagement. The soda jerk's swizz of Gumby and friends is a strong, simple lesson in manipulation that a learning child will take on to defend herself in the future: engaged humans can trick each other over a carefully tweaked reinterpretation of something they both understand to be true. On this playing field, Gumby and friends and child viewer will never make such a mistake again, and may move ahead, enlightened, to the world's next challenge. And, for the villainous soda jerk, the pool of people to bamboozle decreases. The relative levels of wisdom and deception in the world recalibrate,



DOLL - PORCELAIN 1996

and humanity pushes forward an inch. Lohan's lack of engagement places her on increasingly woozy terrain, obedient to no greater logic than the one she's concocted for herself. No rules matter but her own, and no amount of discourse can reverse her course. She drifts away, learning less about the world and being less of the world with each reinvention.

PEAR COMPUTERS

I am currently sitting under a rotunda in the middle of Van Vorst Park in Jersey City, shielded from the hottest afternoon of the year with two young chaps eating ice cream a few yards away. "My dad just got a new computer, it's a pear computer," the chattier one with sprinkles on his cone told the slightly smaller one with a much younger face. "It's just like an apple computer, but they couldn't copy the name without paying them a lot of money." This silliness didn't hang in the air long, and they're talking about brain-freeze now, whether eating ice cream really freezes your brain. But man do I appreciate the lad's idle lie.

To make art we must observe and be imaginative about the world around us so that our interpretations may sit, shoulder to shoulder, beside the things that have inspired them into being. With this sort of accountability we're in a position to make weirder, wiser, more nuanced observations. By planting his idea into the world, the bigger boy's fantasy about pear computers will either be repudiated by the world, or it will come true. Either way it was an excellent idea.

A CORNUCOPIA

Anissa Mack's Durham Fair project grew out of a fundamental desire to create art during a long, open-ended summer, to keep in shape and keep alert by making things while figuring out what to do next. She had just finished graduate school with no easy or prescribed professional path to follow—an essential morsel of knowledge that is very difficult to teach—so she decided to attempt entry into all 73 categories of the craft competition at Connecticut's largest annual agricultural exhibition, the Durham Fair. Mack caned a chair, did scherrenschnitte, designed a beekeeper Halloween costume, and crafted things ranging from robots ('doll toy or game, not wood or needlework' category) to piñatas.

Some things to clear up: Mack's drive in this project was not particularly competitive, even though most of her entries won prizes. At the same time, her

aim was not to critique, to participate at a cold remove. There was no satire, cynicism or calculation in play, just work and the joy of working. Her experience through practice and education, with materials and creative thinking, meant that she was a natural in some categories, while others forced her to learn entirely new, specific, disciplines.

By the end of September 1996, three months after starting, Mack had completed this discrete body of work. It had been entered and recorded into the fair's history, and had returned with yellow, red and blue rosettes affixed as proof and souvenir of the journey it had made. The project was complete, and the prize-winning entries were exhibited in an art gallery setting.

Viewed this way, the project took off, newly fertile with pathos and interest and abundant narrative most of all, smart and useful narratives about what contemporary art is and what it might be, where it might fit in our lives. A viewer could see the criteria of the judges, could feel out and consider the qualities these experts were looking for as they determined what makes something better than anything else. With the judges' eyes recorded in the work this way, the viewer could reflect on Mack's presence at the fair as a participant whose broader designation was 'contemporary artist', rather than hobbyist or craftsman. The viewer could reflect on that contemporary artist taking part in a traditional ritual and reflect on the nature and value of public exhibition. And all the while, the viewer could see the objects stay the same, to still be birdhouses and decorative mailboxes and ceramic vases.

Mack delivers her work without inflection. Hers is not an agitational or politicized approach: the work does not exist first to challenge or comment on other art that is made with sceney solipsism. It does not start its life on an intellectual, theoretical playing field, and it is not explicitly about the idea of fine art (this alone makes Mack unusual among her peers). Hers is a realm of puzzles, lists, rebuses and lessons, the type of art whose goal is to communicate. The directness of the work is the sort found when encountering a plaque by a monument. It appeals proudly as nothing more than what it is, then it illuminates, and then it nourishes.

Folk art is a word blasted by meaning, and won't do, but I'm satisfied to call Mack's art functional. This is not to say that it is unsophisticated or undesirable,



far from it, but that it delivers a direct message available to all. And the directness is nuanced, it can sustain a huge amount of meaning; it is not denied magic and beauty simply because of the way it communicates. You'll readily note, from the pictures, that the artist can commandingly conjure the intangible frisson of politics, and humor, and cuteness, and absurdity, and contemplation from these objects.

Directness is the fact that these objects follow an unwavering, deliberate path to reveal what they are. When the artist repeated the exact project ten years later, and exhibited both series together, the project was reborn. It exploded again, with new narratives about judgment, success, growth and learning curves. The project grew, and meaning again accrued. The beauty in the uninflected work of Anissa Mack is that it takes on meaning as it grows. It never loses meaning, no boom-bust structure here. It doesn't shrink.

It aims to grow organically, and hold meaning. This is the plaque on a monument, or the word game, or the heirloom, or the book of lists: it is about the ways

and lasting pleasures of teaching and learning and letting ideas build. This is the difference between universality and generality that the peerless 20th-Century artist-teacher Ben Shahn liked talking about. Universality is a simple thing with unmeasurable potential. “The universal is that unique thing which affirms the unique quality of all things,” or, in other words, the universal is the weird thing that promotes and protects the weirdness of all things.

Anissa Mack recognizes that art is something that we cannot help but make, that our desire to interpret and express our curiosity with the things we see is too urgent to be denied. By making things we explain ourselves to others. Each of her weird things corroborates another of the world’s many weird things, burrowing itself and putting proud roots into the present as it anticipates growing into, and educating, the future.